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ABSTRACT

In transforming any college writing program into a cross-disciplinary writing program, similar to the one instituted at Beaver College in Philadelphia, the following steps are suggested: enlist the support of respected English faculty members, request colleagues in other departments to submit sample freshman writing assignments, encourage other faculty members to look beyond issues of evaluation to the teaching of writing processes, and introduce students in composition courses to a variety of strategies for different writing tasks. The English department should provide models of effective techniques for conducting a composition program for other departments to emulate in modified form; these techniques include the following: have every student write several pages each week, either a new project or a revision of an earlier draft; have all students complete designated exercises in prewriting, drafting, shaping, and revising; direct students to duplicate preliminary drafts to share in small peer groups and sometimes with the instructor; and have students submit two essays at midterm for evaluation as finished products. The use of peer review procedures of early drafts of writing assignments is recommended to appeal to busy colleagues in other disciplines. (DF)

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ADMINISTERING A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM

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ADMINISTERING A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM

In 1945, Jacques Barzun, an historian, wrote the following in a book called Teacher in America:

> Above the beginner's level, the important fact is that writing cannot be taught exclusively in a course called English Composition. Writing can only be taught by the united efforts of the entire teaching staff. This holds good of any school, college, or university.

The idea of writing in the total curriculum is not new and should not be astonishing. /two plus two makes four. As Wayne Booth said in his keynote address, Writing, like reading, is an essential part of the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, Alfred Kitzhaber's Dartmouth report in the 1960's made clear that American students even at prestigious Ivy League institutions were not doing very much writing. Even in their English courses, students studied grammar or analyzed literature, but they did not write as a natural part of each academic day.

Somehow our own beliefs as scholars about the value and necessity of writing were not being implemented in the institutions where we were teaching.

> Between the idea
> And the reality
> Between the motion
> And the act
> Falls the Shadow (T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men")

Such dysjunction between belief and practice is an administrative problem.

In December 1975, when our academic deans read in Newsweek that Johnny couldn't write, many of them, like the Dean at Beaver College, passed the problem along to their local writing program administrator, usually the co-ordinator of the freshman composition program. At that time I held that title at Beaver, and I would like to share with you this afternoon some pointers for transforming any college writing program into what all writing programs should be--cross-disciplinary.

Tomorrow morning my colleagues will have a chance to speak on a panel entitled, "Writing in the Total Curriculum: the Beaver College Model." That panel will take place at 8:30 A.M. in LaSalle B. & C. At that time you will hear reports from our dean, from our English department chairperson, and from a member of our history department.

Beaver is a small liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia. We have only sixty full-time faculty members, the size of the English department alone at many of the institutions represented in this room. We also have a tradition of collegiality and commitment to teaching that have made it a lot easier for us to share ideas about writing. A grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities has permitted us to share our ideas about writing, not just with each other, but with experts in composition from all over the country.

I realize that you have all probably decided at this point to stop listening to this talk because at your own institutions you lack the grants, the collegiality, or the size to make a cross-disciplinary writing program feasible. And I am under no illusions that anyone can transfer the entire Beaver program to another setting. The first step in administering a cross-disciplinary writing program involves an incisive analysis of your own institution's traditions, strengths, prejudices, and problems.

Many of the problems that you are now beginning to formulate are problems that we faced at Beaver and some of the measures that we took may be instructive to you. As Santayana said, "Academic infighting is so bitter because the stakes are so small." Smaller colleges can sometimes be even more bitter. Beaver's size was not necessarily an advantage.

We have a strong departmental tradition at Beaver. I suspect that we share this tradition with most liberal arts colleges and that the tradition is even

stronger at larger institutions. Nothing at Beaver has scholarly respectability unless it is of central concern to an academic department. Fortunately for the success of a college-wide writing program, all members of the English department--senior and junior--traditionally have taught at least one section of composition every semester. In the past they did not do so joyfully, but they did it. Thus, we had a head start in what I believe is the first step in establishing a cross-disciplinary writing program: the support of respected people in the English department.

When a few faculty members within the English department are committed to teaching and scholarship in composition, they can begin to get the department's own house in order. If English department members think that the teaching of writing is a menial task, so will everyone else. If English department members think that the teaching of writing is a stimulating intellectual activity, others will think so, too.

With the support of key colleagues in English, the coordinator of composition can start a college-wide writing program by making freshman composition a cross-disciplinary course. We in English too often map the genres in a way analagous to that famous New Yorker cover that shows the map of the United States with Manhattan in great detail and then Chicago, San Francisco, and Japan as the only spots of civilization in that vast expanse to the West. We in English have made a detailed map of fiction, drama, and poetry. But then to the West we stick in small flags for the essay and then for something called technical writing.

We need to show more respect for the varieties of academic discourse that are not represented in the Odyssey reader. We have to recognize that the format and style of a Conrad Lorenz essay may not be much help to a student struggling

with the constraints of an observational study of the gestation, birth, and nurturing of a litter of rat pups. We need to ask our colleagues in other departments to send us sample freshman assignments. We do not have to become biologists to help students to implement the instructions on a freshman biology assignment. It seems to me that even on a large university campus it should be possible to find out the sorts of things that freshmen are asked to write in other courses, even if we have to ask the freshmen themselves. Ideally, we should consult with our colleagues. Even at large places, we occasionally run into people in other disciplines at the faculty club or on the tennis court. Even better, we can use some of the deadly time spent on university-wide committees to consult with our colleagues about the writing that they require in their courses. Especially now that many of us are sitting on committees to revise the General Education requirements at our institutions, we can direct the discussion to writing as a fundamental of general education.

When we begin to seek advice from our colleagues, we can't be discouraged when they ask the wrong questions. Many instructors in other disciplines will begin with the assumption that writing is defined strictly in terms of its surface features. They will complain that students who pass our freshman composition courses go on as sophomores to write illiterate history exams. Those that do not scold us for contributing to grade inflation may ask us whether they should "count" writing on their exams and papers. Their initial interest in writing as a cross-disciplinary enterprise will probably be expressed in terms of problems about evaluation. It is wise to discuss issues of evaluation with interested colleagues, but it is not wise, I think, to permit all cross-disciplinary energies to crystallize around a movement for a writing proficiency requirement for graduation. Faculty energies can be better spent on teaching the processes of writing in a variety of disciplines.

Once again, the emphasis on process must begin within the composition program. If the composition program introduces students to a variety of strategies for different writing tasks, then the composition course will exemplify the procedures that we want our colleagues to reinforce.

I want now to describe our composition program at Beaver because I believe that our design is a plausible one for an instituiton of any size or tradition. Our program emphasizes instruction in writing processes and the wide use of peer review. Every student must write several pages every week. Sometimes, the week's writing will be a revised draft of work done earlier; sometimes, the week's writing will be a new project. Individual students frequently are working at different stages of their projects, since some students are satisfied after one or two drafts and some students need to do three or four. Sometimes all students are required to do designated exercises in pre-writing, drafting, shaping, and revising. Students are also required to duplicate preliminary drafts and to share them in small groups with peers and sometimes with the instructor. The instructor encourages students to duplicate these drafts in their natural messy state. The composition teachers frequently duplicate their own rough drafts for student response. No grades are assigned before mid-term, with one exception. Failure to comply with the course requirements for submitting and sharing drafts results in a grade of F. We call this our "sudden death rule." At mid-term, students submit their full writing folder with two essays designated as ready for evaluation. These essays are then graded as finished products. Students soon learn that a paper with six spelling errors is simply not finished. But if a student has designated it as ready for evaluation, he must take the consequences. Regarding papers as unfinished, rather than poor, opens up a universe of infinite hope. Students also learn something about self-assessment when they get to say what is finished and what is not.

Students also learn a great deal about strategies for composing when they see that they will not be penalized for false starts and for taking risks on preliminary drafts. On the other hand, they eventually have the responsibility of finishing a designated number of projects and of submitting these for evaluation.

Once we on the composition staff have committed ourselves to teaching writing processes in the composition course, we can then suggest that our colleagues in other disciplines might actually find life easier if they do the same. If we on the composition staff teach our freshmen to use peer review procedures, we can better convince our colleagues that early drafts can be read by other students and do not necessarily have to be carted home by busy professors.

Extensive use of peer review procedures depends on students' understanding of the concept of acknowledgment. Once again, it is up to us on the composition staff to teach students how to write an acknowledgements page and to teach the difference between acknowledgment and documentation. One serendipitous effect of this instruction is that students may finally understand the concept of documentation, beyond their conventional knowledge of where to place the footnote numbers.

When our students are writing drafts and sharing them first in their comp courses and later in their other courses, we have thereby instituted a cross-disciplinary writing program. When faculty members can restrain themselves from grading every word that a student puts on paper, we are closer to the goal, as Mina Shaughnessy describes it, of "making writing a more integral part of the learning process in all courses" (Errors and Expectations, p. 88). Soon faculty members in all departments will be following Shaughnessy's

other suggestions: "They can require that students keep efficient class notes or commonplace books or journals and they can encourage in countless ways the habits of writing things down (but not necessarily 'up' as finished products)."

The secret of administering a cross-disciplinary writing program is in first designing and implementing a freshman composition program that serves the needs of all majors, not excluding the needs of English literature majors. Then we should exemplify in our own practices in the composition program techniques that we wish our non-English colleagues to emulate in modified form. When students and faculty members in all disciplines are communicating with each other in writing, we may have something even better than a cross-disciplinary writing program: we may have a community of scholars.